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One Hundred Eighth Congress
U.S. House of Representatives
Select Committee on Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20515

October 28, 2003

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CHIEF COUNSEL AND
DEPUTY STAFF DIRECTOR

Mr. Joe Henderson
Director
Emergency Operations Center
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
1600 Clifton Rd.
Atlanta, GA 30333

Dear Mr. Henderson:

As you may be aware, on Wednesday, October 22, 2003, there was a bioterror threat made against certain officials in the City of Woodville, Texas involving at least three letters containing powder with alleged biological agents, including ricin. Luckily, this case was determined to be a hoax. I believe the citizens and local officials of Woodville performed extremely well during this incident. However, the actions of several federal agencies, including CDC, have raised several questions about the federal government's planning, preparedness, and response to a bioterror threat.

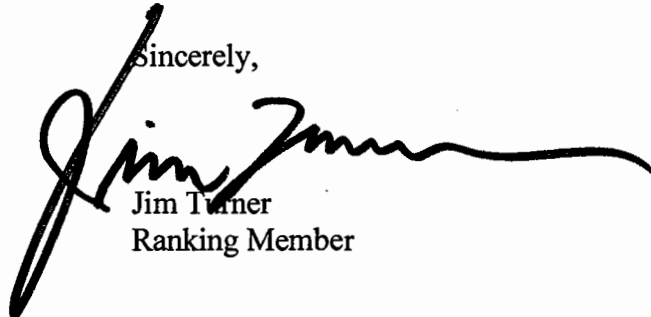
During this incident, the envelopes containing the powder substance were sent to the City of Houston's Department of Health lab for initial testing. A request was made for the substance to be tested for ricin, but Houston's lab did not have the capability to do this test. On the morning of October 23, 2003, the lab contacted CDC to find out what they should do with the sample. By the end of the day, no one from the CDC had responded to the lab's inquiry and we subsequently learned no one from CDC contacted the FBI. Given the fact that ricin kills its victims within 48 hours, time was absolutely of the essence in this situation. That is why I am troubled that the CDC did not return the lab's call that day, and did not notify the FBI of an alleged ricin attack when it received the call from the Houston lab. These failures indicate the lack of a clear and prompt protocol for dealing with bioterror threats. This must be remedied immediately.

To assist in my review of the federal government's response to the Woodville incident, I would appreciate receiving the following materials no later than Tuesday, November 11, 2003:

- the protocols CDC has issued to state and local public health departments and laboratories with respect to the testing of samples and communication with federal law enforcement agencies;
- information regarding why the CDC failed to immediately respond to the Houston lab's inquiry regarding the Woodville incident;
- information on the number of alleged bioagents submitted to the CDC for testing since October, 2001, including the number actually tested, the number not tested (and the reasons the samples were not tested), whether there are guidelines for local and state labs to use in determining when to send samples to CDC for testing;
- if available, the number of suspected samples submitted to local and state public health labs, the numbers tested, the numbers not tested (and the reasons the samples were not tested); and
- why the CDC failed to notify the FBI about the Woodville incident.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter. I hope a focus on what happened last week in Woodville will improve future CDC responses to bioterror attacks. If you have any questions about this matter, please contact Carla Buckner of my staff at 202-226-2616.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jim Turner", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Jim Turner
Ranking Member

**WOODVILLE, TEXAS - ALLEGED RICIN INCIDENT
TIMELINE**

October 22, 2003

Letter #1

- found in Woodville Municipal Court building by District Clerk:
 - she opened envelope & found white powder in envelope, with note
 - “You’ve been contaminated”
 - name / address of sender on envelope
 - she set it aside, covering with paper towels, washed hands immediately
- local authorities called, including Tyler County Sheriff Gary Hennigan
 - also serves as County’s homeland security coordinator
 - called U.S. Postal Service because letters had been sent through mail
- Tyler County Hospital Administrator on site, isolated two employees exposed to powder:
 - response truck equipped with decontamination suits
 - patients sent in sealed ambulance to local hospital where they were decontaminated in isolation rooms
- “someone” told City Police Chief Yasco to call the FBI:
 - he called FBI Field office in Lufkin
 - spoke with Agent Mike Ronane (spelling?), telling Ronane what was going on
 - Agent Ronane told Police Chief “let me know if there’s anything I can do.”
- USPS Inspector Brenda Menstrong (spelling?) Triple-bagged letters in evidence bags, drove them to Houston
 - unclear on where bags remained until they were delivered to Houston Health Department lab the next morning

Letter #2

- found same day by Municipal clerk in municipal court building/city hall
 - saw “dust” coming out of letter
 - remained unopened
- handled in same manner as letter #1

Letter #3

October 22, 2003

- addressed to Woodville City Attorney Jim Allison
 - return address from Texas Department of Corrections
 - his assistant verified not one of his clients, stamped “return to sender” & placed envelope in outgoing mail; picked up that afternoon

October 23, 2003

- somehow ends up in “outgoing mail” of District Clerk
 - who had received similar letter day before
 - no one can say how it got there
 - handled in same manner as letters 1 & 2